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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how college faculty perceive and describe their online teaching experiences in a computer-mediated environment fully absent of the physical presence. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling of 10 college faculty. Data were collected using semi-structured open-ended interviews conducted at the participants' site of preference with followup interviews via e-mail. Findings suggested that teaching online is work intensive and rewarding for college faculty. It was work intensive because of the length of engagement before and during instruction and because of the depth of engagement during course delivery. However, faculty stated it was rewarding when the instructor experiences satisfaction throughout the process of design and delivery of instruction. They indicated they learned a lot from the learners. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

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A Phenomenological Study of College Faculty Experiences Derived from Teaching in a Computer-Mediated Environment When There is an Absence of Physical Presence

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Abstract: This phenomenological study investigated the meaning of the online teaching experiences of college faculty when there was an absence of physical presence. Findings suggest that teaching online is work intensive because of the length of engagement before and during instruction and the depth of engagement during the delivery of a course; however, it is also rewarding when the instructor experiences satisfaction throughout the process of design and delivery of instruction.

Introduction

Online teaching appears to be changing higher education by challenging the traditional social structure of the university. For example, institutions of higher education used to be characterized as labor-intensive and campus based with about 90% of their learners between the ages of 18 to 21 attending college on a full-time basis. Most of these learners lived in campus residence halls and attended educational institutions that were organized around centralized structures formed by faculty and learners at a specific place at a particular time (Connick, 1997). In the 1970s the make up of the learner population changed as a service and information economy began to replace the industrial economy. According to Connick (1997), the number of 18 year-old learners started to decline and in order to sustain enrollment, colleges began to recruit older adults. Consequently, the educational scene has been modified remarkably. Today "only 52 percent of college [learners] are eighteen to twenty-one, and fewer than 15 percent fit the profile of the residential [learners] – young, full-time, and living on campus" (p. 8).

Connick (1997) argues that "just as the American economy has moved away from the industrial model to one that is information based, technology intensive, niche oriented, and decentralized, so will education have to change" (p. 9). Educational change may mean transformation of the educational paradigm. New demographics and new reality challenge the traditional way of teaching which has been in place for hundreds of years (Connick, 1997). The new paradigm based on the nature of information technology and telecommunications changes the role of the faculty member to a person who plays a supportive role in the teaching-learning process. Teaching and learning become a partnership resulting from learner-centered environments. These environments are not controllable and predictable; they require faculty members to think about themselves very differently as instructors, recognize the changes in the educational paradigm, engage in new kinds of activities, and reconsider the meaning of being an instructor.

Much of the research related to online instruction is written from the analysis of the learners' experience (Burge, 1994; Herrmann, 1988; McLoughlin & Oliver, 1995; Wilkes & Burnham, 1991) or from investigations of instructors who have taught partially online (Annand & Haughey, 1997; Conceição-Runlee & Reilly, 1999; Diekelmann, Schuster, & Nosek, 1998). In addition, research related to faculty who participate in distance teaching in higher education has focused mainly on the changing role of the instructor (Beaudoin, 1990; Gunawardena, 1992), the role of teaching (Sammons, 1988), faculty planning for distance teaching (Wolcott, 1993), the lack of faculty development (Dillon & Walsh, 1992), tenure, promotion, and rewards (Wolcott, 1997), and institutional support (Olcott & Wright, 1995). Therefore, this study seeks to

understand the experiences of faculty who teach in an online environment by answering the following question: How do college faculty perceive and describe their online teaching experiences in a computer-mediated environment which is fully absent of the physical presence?

Methodology

The research method for this study is grounded in a phenomenological framework to explore the phenomenon of online teaching as experienced by college faculty. The purpose of phenomenological research is to provide an actual and conscious overview of the phenomenon that evokes the reader's life experiences of it. This study followed the empirical phenomenological research inquiry based on Moustakas' approach, which focuses on a situation in which the experience investigated occurred. The researcher looks for descriptions to construct structures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The rationale for using phenomenology was based on the nature of the research question. The research question was consistent with my philosophical orientation, provided a clear process for setting aside the researcher's preconceptions about the phenomenon, and resulted in a shared examination of the phenomenon by me and study participants.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) of 10 college faculty (Barbara, David, George, Kate, Laura, Marco, Mary, Olivia, Pat, and Tony) based on the following criteria: (1) participants had to have an interest in computer conferencing and have taught online without coercion, (2) the teaching experiences of faculty did not include formal face-to-face interactions with students during the course (the entire course activities had to be online), (3) participants had to actively practice instruction in a computer-mediated environment at the higher education level and be working in a tenured or tenure-track position, (4) participants had to have taught the same online course(s) in a computer-mediated environment previously, and (5) participants had to be willing to engage in an interview process, which also involved follow-up interviews.

Data were collected using semi-structured open-ended interviews conducted at the participants' site of preference with follow-up interviews via electronic mail. I followed the essential processes that characterize a phenomenological analysis: Epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. The *Epoche* was the process in which I set aside everyday understandings, prejudgments, and biases about online teaching. During the *phenomenological reduction* my task was to look at the phenomenon of online teaching and to describe it in textual language – the focus was on the experience and its meanings. During this stage I uncovered, defined, and analyzed the elements and essential structures of the phenomenon of online teaching. Then, data were grouped into clusters and repetitive, irrelevant, or overlapping data were removed, leaving only the textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon of online teaching. Then the *imaginative variation* was performed on each theme; this meant to describe the structural elements of the phenomenon, the variation of possible meanings and perspectives of the phenomenon from different vantage points. The final step involved an intuitive-reflective integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions to develop a *synthesis of the meanings and essences* of the experience (Becker, 1992; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1989). Member checks, peer examination, and detailed accounts of participants' experiences were used to increase trustworthiness of this inquiry (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998).

Findings

Two major themes emerged from the phenomenological data analysis of the meaning of the online teaching experience: (1) work intensity, and (2) rewards.

Work Intensity

A common remark among study participants concerned the intense work involved in designing and delivering an online course due to the *length of engagement* before and during instruction and the *depth of engagement* during the delivery of a course.

Length of Engagement. According to study participants, teaching an online course required more time to design and deliver instruction than a regular face-to-face course because it involved (1) organizing content, (2) presenting information that addressed different learning styles, and (3) providing lecture notes up front. Tony stated that more time was involved in organizing content for an online course because he had to make decisions about what to teach six months in advance. When organizing content, Olivia was concerned with individual learning styles. She explained that some individuals prefer to have course materials available in advance; others favor accessing materials just before they are due; therefore she provided a little bit of everything. David acknowledged that it was a lot of work preparing the course because he provided all his lectures up front. Barbara said that there was a need to foresee and to have everything ready by the start of the class because it could be overwhelming for the instructor to be both conducting and creating the course simultaneously. In direct contrast, Tony stated that online teaching took less time than his regular face-to-face teaching because once the course content was loaded onto the Web; all he needed to do was to interact with learners by responding to them.

Delivery of instruction involved (1) managing the course in the integrated software program, (2) monitoring and assessing learner performance, (3) providing course clarification, (4) maintaining continuity, and (5) providing learner support. Class management functions included administering and maintaining the course in the integrated software program. According to Olivia, these functions included putting up the course documents, updating the external links, and managing the threaded discussions.

Mary acknowledged that monitoring learner performance was time consuming, but at the same time it was gratifying because she felt that she could have a greater impact on each individual learner. She contrasted her online experience with her face-to-face teaching, "You don't have the two and a half hour class that meets that week, but instead you're sitting back reading everything every [learner] does and reflecting on it and providing feedback." Providing clarification was an important aspect of online teaching. Kate used a private area in the integrated software program to clarify expectations about the course, ask questions, and announce course activities. Mary logged in multiple times a day and provided constant feedback to learners, so they knew how they were doing as a way of clarifying course assignments.

Another important aspect of online teaching was maintaining continuity. For David, the ability to maintain continuity during instruction was a challenge. He explained that he wanted to give people a look and feel that they were talking and interacting with real people. That meant that as a faculty member, he had to be on the computer every morning, responding in the forum, replying to email messages, and entering grades. Pat recognized that teaching an online course involved a much higher workload in comparison to regular classroom teaching. He explained, "For every course that I teach online the amount of work, not just to develop it, but delivery of it, it's at least 50% more than the campus course." The main reason for the difference between

online and face-to-face courses was the number of interactions that he had with individual learners.

Reading course postings was a continuous task for the instructor in the online environment. According to Kate, while learners had to read specific areas of the course, for her this meant more than just reading a few comments here and there. It required reading everyone's comments, which involved a much higher engagement and workload. Another challenge related to continuity involved meeting the needs of learners with diverse cultural backgrounds. Barbara explained that it was difficult to maintain course continuity when learners of diverse backgrounds spoke English as a second language. There were lots of misunderstandings related to the discussion topic. Learner support was another aspect of the online teaching function. For David, when technology did not work, he played the role of a technical consultant by having learners contact him. Laura's institution had toll free number available, so she agreed to be available for private email and fax, in addition to by telephone.

Depth of Engagement. For the majority of the study participants, the online interactions were a lot of work and time consuming because they involved a strong cognitive and affective effort during the delivery of instruction. Faculty acknowledged that when teaching online it was challenging to stay engaged in a conversation, keep the class focused, distinguish between administrative and personal information, and pursue a comprehensive discussion. According to Olivia, one of the challenges of online teaching was to stay engaged in a conversation and read the emotional tone behind a conversation. She acknowledged that to interact online, the instructor took more time to respond to learners for two reasons: (a) instructors had to pay attention to two conversations, "You have to close [a message] up, open up another one," and (b) instructor could not see or hear emotions, tones, body language, and eye contact.

Barbara indicated that one of the biggest challenges for her, as an instructor, was to keep an online class focused, present information in a truly engaging way, and ask questions in the right way. For Tony, pursuing comprehensive discussion was challenging because the group seemed to jump from topic to topic and the discussions did not go deep enough. Marco also noted that it was difficult to distinguish between information that was purely administrative and information sent by learners that needed personal attention. He explained that when he taught online he had to give a much more comprehensive, more thoughtful response, "It makes you do research because your response to a question is there for everyone to read, whereas face-to-face you can say something…off the cuff. But when you're having to post it, you have to be sure."

Faculty acknowledged that it was difficult to be personal online and there was a need to be more diligent in order to emotionally engage with learners. Impersonal experiences were described as the ones that lacked immediate feedback, there was a formality of communication, and spontaneity was lost. Marco compared online learning with performing on the stage and filming for television to illustrate the lack of immediate feedback, "The difference being that they don't have the feedback and they can't hear the laughter or the response of the audience. Online teaching vis-à-vis face-to-face teaching is similar to performing on stage or filming in front of a camera." According to Tony, a professional challenge as an educator was trying to find ways to be personal online. He stated that he needed to be creative in order to establish a fairly high degree of personal connection. Like Tony, Olivia indicated that she had to work more diligently to engage with learners in a deliberate way.

Rewards

Although the online teaching experience of college faculty was work intensive, most instructors acknowledged that the teaching experience gave them some type of satisfaction.

There was a wide array of perspectives related to the type of satisfaction gained from the experience of designing and delivering an online course. Olivia recognized the experience as stimulating because she thought that she was not good at teaching online yet. She explained the rewarding nature of the online environment, "When there's an 'aha' moment or 'light bulb' moment…that's very rewarding. It's a real asinine example, but we still don't know what caused it to be."

Laura thought that online teaching was exciting, "It's just fun logging in and seeing what people have to say. And it's exciting watching the [learners] really respond and get into it…I think that's really exciting and that's what kind of keeps me going… it's kind of exciting to rethink of a new way to deliver instruction." Barbara also enjoyed watching learners interface with each other online. She stated: "You see [learners] going back and forth, even in a non-real-time environment, when you are watching messages back and forth in what seems to be real time, that's really exciting." Mary indicated that the online teaching experience was gratifying because she got to know her learners better: "There's a tremendous gratification in doing this because of how well I get to know the [learners]."

Faculty also indicated that they learned a lot from the learners. Pat stated that while teaching online for about six years he learned more from his online learners than he had learned the previous 15 years from his on-campus learners. Tony indicated that he learned a lot more from his online learners than face-to-face learners because the profile of the online learners had a tremendous influence on how the experience evolved. Tony explained that online learners were "older, more experienced, highly motivated, and fit the image of a nontraditional learner to a T." Barbara also saw online teaching as a learning experience because "the people that I teach are…working professionals in the field, the practitioners versus the researchers. The web-based environment kind of levels that, I think, and it really helps with that divide."

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Findings of this study suggest that teaching online is work intensive and rewarding for college faculty. It is work intensive because of the length of engagement before and during instruction and because of the depth of engagement during the delivery of a course. More time is required to design an online course than a regular face-to-face course because design involves organizing content, presenting information that addresses different learning styles, and providing course materials in advance. Delivery of an online course is work intensive because the instructor is involved in managing the course in the integrated software program, monitoring and assessing learner performance, providing course clarification, maintaining continuity, and providing learner support. Engagement during the delivery of an online course is time consuming because it involves in-depth cognitive and affective effort from the instructor. During online interactions, the instructor is involved in a cognitive effort in order to stay engaged in a conversation, keep the class focused, distinguish between administrative and personal information, and pursue a comprehensive discussion; and an affective effort in order to be personal and emotionally engaged with the learners. Albeit the meaning of the online teaching experience of college faculty seems to indicate work intensity, faculty stated that it is also rewarding when the instructor experiences satisfaction throughout the process of design and delivery of instruction.

This study has practical implications for adult education as it relates to teaching improvement, instructional design, and administrative support. Studying the meaning of the online teaching experiences can be beneficial to those who have not explored the online teaching

environment, but may be encouraged through the experience of others. This study allows readers to begin to understand and empathize with the phenomenon of online teaching and in turn determine the extent to which interpretations make meaning for them. This study can help faculty members gain a faculty perspective on online teaching and in turn recognize that it may require a lot of time initially to design and deliver instruction, but it can also be rewarding to teach online. This study can also assist instructional designers by raising their awareness of the experiences faculty encounter when teaching in an online environment. This knowledge will enable instructional designers to advise faculty of less time consuming ways to design and deliver instruction. Additionally, this study can help administrators recognize faculty members' need for time release given the length of engagement required to design and deliver an online course and consequently reexamine faculty workload and compensation for online teaching.

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